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ABSTRACT

Rural community development is undergoing changing visions, activities, and methodologies. Factors impacting this change include decentralization, budget reduction in the public sector, and globalization and downsizing in the private sector. Community "building" (community-generated change and emphasis on capacities rather than deficiencies) must replace the concept of community "development." In this paper, visitor-employed photography (VEP) is explored as an appropriate new tool in community building. Nineteen research participants from the Winnebago and Omaha tribes were given cameras and asked to take photographs of self-selected positive and negative aspects of their environment and share and explain their perceptions. Analysis of VEP data showed community strengths, directions for change, and resident priorities and vision. Omaha participants were concerned about their lack of inclusion on the local school board and consequent lack of control over curriculum and other matters. Positive VEP images showed individual teachers who encouraged study of Indian culture despite the antagonistic school board, while negative images showed fences that prevented viewing of school sports events by Indians who could not afford admission. Winnebago participants focused on their community's need for adequate affordable housing. VEP interviews singled out community leaders and provided the means for directing efforts toward community building and action. (SAS)

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VISIONS ALONG THE TRAIL: COMMUNITY ACTION AND VISITOR EMPLOYED PHOTOGRAPHY IN TWO NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

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Abstract:

As the concepts and theory of community action changes, the utility and appropriateness of the methodologies change. In this paper some issues raised by the utilization of visitor employed photography in a community "development" project are discussed in terms of the new cultural and theoretical trends. Even the use of the term "development" is now being challenged and we consider what will take its place and what will be the methodological consequences.

INTRODUCTION

Although community development has had a long and significant place in rural communities and in rural sociology, the content of its visions, the program activities, and the context of rural communities have been, and are undergoing some radical changes. As these changes occur, new methodologies are needed to help produce results which are in line with the new philosophy.

Rural sociologists have long worked with rural communities in their struggles to become stronger and more viable communities. The methodologies and theoretical concepts utilized in these efforts have varied over time. At the present time major changes are taking place as communities and rural sociologists attempt to come to terms with a new rural reality built upon new concepts.

A variety of factors have conspired to reform and revitalize the theory and practice of "development". Two recent articles in Rural Development News (Sept. 1997 and Winter 1997-98) by Cornelia Butler Flora suggest that more responsibility has been placed on communities by "decentralization and budget reduction in the public sector and globalization and downsizing in the private sector" (Flora, 1997, p.1). Flora's analysis suggests that the "old"

development perspective and practice is changing rapidly due to these and other factors. In the articles Flora contrasts and compares the old view of community "development" with the new view of community "building". She suggests that a conceptual shift must take place so that the final vision of the ideal community must be generated by its members. Another shift includes an emphasis upon searching for capacities to build upon, rather than deficiencies to remedy (Flora, 1997, p.3).

This shift in paradigm from "community development" to "community building" requires tools which support it. We would like to suggest that we have found VEP to be an appropriate tool. This paper gives some examples of how VEP can be applied to, and is consistent with a "community building" approach. The examples are taken from a research project exploring members of the Winnebago and Omaha Indian tribes' perceptions about their communities . From these VEP studies, came tribal members visions of a better community, strengths and capacities within each tribe, areas which need to be changed, and remnants of the old perspective which have failed.

DESCRIPTION OF VEP.

Visitor employed photography is a method of exploring people's perceptions of their environment. Research participants are asked to share their perceptions by taking photo's of salient aspects of the environment and explaining their responses. For example, in our the Winnebago and Omaha Indian research, tribal members were asked to photograph features of their communities which represented

important aspects which they felt were either positive or needed to be changed. Each participant was given a camera and was driven around the community to areas of their choice. Participants were encouraged to choose as many areas as they felt were important to describe their communities. At each location a photograph was taken and information about the community aspect was tape recorded and later transcribed. Participants included ten Winnebagos and nine Omahas.

Unlike many other photographic methods, in VEP the research participants, and **not** the researchers choose the subjects for the photographs. Because of this, the resulting vision is one which comes directly from community members and not outside experts. Both the photographs and the verbal information from VEP were content analyzed to provide a meaningful picture of how residents viewed their communities. Minimal direction was provided by the researcher. The researcher was there to record observations, not to direct them. Thus, this method clearly is in line with the philosophy of "community building" as explained by Flora.

The analysis of the VEP data pointed out community strengths and directions for change from the point of view of the participants. A real value of VEP is that the resulting photo's can be used for discussion with community members and others to explore future plans and directions.

The data from VEP is rich. It can be analyzed for clues about the results and efficacy of the old system of doing "development". It yields information about the priorities residents would like to

see in their communities, and it gives clues about how to build the vision of the new community. From the Omaha and Winnebago studies information from two broad areas: education and housing will be used to illustrate the kinds of specific information generated by VEP.

EDUCATION FROM THE OMAHAS' POINT OF VIEW

Data from VEP provides clues about residents' ideal vision for their community. During our research it was clear that members of the Omaha tribe wanted self governance over educational matters.

The education of Omaha tribal children was split into two schools. One was located in the Indian community of Macy. The other was located in Walt Hill, a mixed white/Indian community. Almost all the white children living in Walthill had fled to private schools, leaving about 80% Indian children.

While the Indians had complete control over the Macy school, they had none over the Walthill school even though a large majority were Indian. There were no Indians on the Walthill school board. The majority of residents in that district were white allowing them to outvote the Indian population and retain complete control over the composition of the membership of the school board.

It was clear when talking with the Omaha's who lived in Walthill that they felt that Indian representation on the school board was vital to their idealized vision of a viable community. Lack of inclusion was connected to very important issues concerning the education of their children.

One of those issues was curriculum. Without Indian

representation, the school curriculum mimicked the white culture and completely ignored the Indians. The reason curriculum was so important was that it was a vehicle for passing on the unique culture of the tribe. By state law the schools had to provide a second language. The Indians wanted it to be Omaha. However, the whites insisted upon Spanish - even though most of their children were not in that school. In fact none of the school board members had children in the Walthill school.

VEP provided glimpses of how individual teachers were able to encourage study of Indian culture in spite of the school board. Two teachers in particular were responsible, the art teacher and the band teacher. The art teacher was determined to support Native American folk art as an important artistic endeavor. She encouraged the study of Indian art and even instructed the children in the practice of making moccasins. She got the pattern from one of the children's relatives and her entire class made moccasins.

The band director also showed leadership ability. He did not lament as his band collapsed with the lose of the white children. Until that time the band was composed almost entirely of white children who owned their own instruments. Students had to provide their own instruments to be in the band. Most Indian families were too poor to do so. After the white exodus, the band director began to rebuild. He did this by finding ways for the school to buy or have donated instruments. This opened up the possibility for Indian children to be in the band. He was very positive about their participation and used every opportunity to say how well the

Indian children were doing and how quickly they caught on. As we became aware through VEP he was a very positive force in building community.

Another issue related to both community and education was the need of the Indian community to feel that they were full and equal members of the Walthill community. Because of the policies concerning fees for participating as spectators at the games, Indians who were parents of children on school sport teams felt very much discriminated against. According to one participant the school set an entry fee ...."$2.50 for children, $3.50 for adults, or something like that, and so the interesting thing is that people--the Omahas--when we come to the game, we don't pay because you're looking at five, six member families, in a community where...amongst people that don't have twenty bucks to be able to get inside and sit on the bleachers, so our people park around the perimeter--all along here..... In spite of this restriction the Indian parents were very involved in their children and came to their games anyway. (If outsider come to a game) "they're gonna see all the non-Indians up in the bleachers and all the In....but they won't know that those cars are where the Indian people sit." They would park their cars outside the chain link fence, sit on their car hoods and cheer on the team.

The school board did not like this. So they had a second fence erected about 12' beyond the original. This second fence was too close to the sidewalk and road to allow cars to pull off the street and park. Thus, the bleachers sat empty, and the Indian

parents were separated from the playing field by two fences. Needless to say there were some very hard feelings over this matter.

This example shows how community policy and direction without input from all affected members of the community can result in disaster. Suggestions from one participant about how to remedy the situation flowed freely. "We want to get the people in there. Now we have empty bleachers. Why not if you want to charge something, charge a dollar a head--fill up the bleachers and let the community now be inclusive."...."I'd like to see the people who are all along the perimeter...Get in.....I mean now, their kids are the ones that are playing, right?....Yeah, and they're all watching from there and a lot of times they honk the horns and stuff when there's a touchdown, but now they can...they don't have to sit in that "back room" or be sent to that back of...they always call it the "back of the bus" kind of thing. We don't have to do that anymore, right? Just lower that price or let the kids in free and just charge the adults or whatever, but let us sit in the stands now. Let us get closer..... let this be ours, too."

WINNEBAGO HOUSING

Adequate, affordable housing is critically short on both reservations. The second broad area of community life which will be used to illustrate the utility of the information from VEP is that of housing for the members of the Winnebago tribe. One of the real problems of using outside "experts" to determine community needs and solutions is that they are likely to get it wrong. This

is the case with a brand new housing development. The development sits on top a hill which had been clear cut to provide easy access to the building sites. An architect had been hired to make the plans and implement the project. Unfortunately, the project has some major problems. The project was built on the top of an exposed hillside. The vegetation was stripped and replaced with vast expanses of impermeable surfaces, ie. streets, sidewalks, roofs, etc.. Inadequate plans were made for the run off created by the design of the project. When the rains came, they flooded the white neighbors at the bottom of the hill. The tribe was in the process of installing a very expensive drainage system to correct the mistakes created by the outside "experts".

It became quite clear from our research with members of both tribes that individually owned single family housing was part of their ideal community vision. Although the white majority culture had good intentions when providing typical duplex type HUD housing, those efforts resulted in some major failures.

One indication of failure is that the Winnebago HUD housing has been named "the ghetto" by the school kids. The housing project looks run down and poorly maintained. The units are almost identical to each other and lack the normal differentiation one would expect in a neighborhood.

One of the participants gave her view of the situation...."if these houses were scattered throughout, you know, but because these are HUD housing, this is the way they set up, but you would never notice this, if they were individual homes here and there, but

because they are blocked in like this, then you do notice the ones that don't take care of their homes."

Many research participants agreed that this was an aspect of the community that needed to be changed. As an alternative response person after person pointed out resident owned homes as the most diserable alternative. Those owning their own homes made sure they took us to see them. The resident owned homes are easy to distinguish, they are the well cared for, well maintained ones.

Independently owned housing is such a strong part of the participants vision that the community has lost at least one Native American teacher as a result of insufficient opportunities to own a home. Although the school provides housing for teachers, it is not available for individual ownership. One the the research participants has a daughter who left her teaching job on the reservation to take a position in a nearby town so that she could buy a home of her own. In order to own her own home she would have had to buy one off the reservation and commute daily to her job. The long commute and winter snows made this alternative unacceptable.

Housing problems began with the land allotment system. When the white man set up the land tenure system, the damage to the community was initiated. As the system for distributing commonly held tribal land into individual allotments was developed, the structure for housing problems was set in place. Tribally owned communal land was alloted 160 acres to each head of household. Because the Indians are so poor, as the land passed from one

generation to the next, few inheritors wanted to sell their share of the multi-owned asset. It was a garunteed income, however small. Thus, no single owner had responsibility for the land. The land was almost always farmed by non-Indians who rented it through the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The owners each received a small yearly check for their share of the rent.

This set up is related to the housing problem because, even if the original owners had built an adequate home on their property, the members of the next generation did not maintain it. No one individually owned it, so it became no ones responsibility. Furthermore, most tribal members were so poor they lacked the resources to maintain it, even if they wanted to. Thus, one can see abandoned, deteroriating houses even while the shortage of housing is critical.

Through VEP we discovered a common grassroots response to the problem. Many young families are buying mobile homes and placing them on family property. This has the advantage of being a very inexpensive alternative. Also the home can be moved if necessary so that a resident is not improving land that they don't own.

CONCLUSION

These two examples present a glimpse into the types of information available from VEP which would be useful to community building. Through the residents eyes, we can begin to see the vision they have of their future communities. In this research, resident owned housing, decision making power over the education of their children, inclusion as valued members of the community are

all part of that vision. We can also see community strengths including: involved parents, dedicated teachers, and a strong cultural history. From the VEP interviews, people are singled out who are currently playing an important role in maintaining and improving the community. The information which Flora argues is important for directing efforts toward community building are all available through VEP. It is definitely a method which should be utilized by sociologists in their community building efforts.

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